IN SEARCH OF THE LOST LANGUAGE: MATEI CĂLINESCU'S "UN FEL DE JURNAL"

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Abstract: *This study starts from the premise that identity and language are reciprocally definable concepts, so that in such an equation as identity – language – crisis, each of the first two terms appears as an expression of the other. Therefore, the paper approaches "Un fel de jurnal" as a sample of such an equation translated into the attempt of the self – exiled intellectual to restore himself both as a writer, and an individual. The anguish and dilemmas of the expatriate, whose uprooting is rather linguistic than geographic, make up a discourse constructed around the metaphor of wasting time and sustained by the split conscience of the protagonist. Therefore, we shall attempt to prove that this scission is language – related and goes as deep as the perception of reality itself. Thus, the pages written in Romanian play the essential and subtle role of 'wasting' physical time, that is of separating temporarily from the contingent and transitory reality of the adoptive country, in order to immerse into the meaningful, inner space and time of the roots. In this sense, the journal becomes the only territory within which the author can restore his identity, as "the ideal means of wasting time is a lost language".*
Key-words*: language, identity, crisis*

1. Survival – Identity – Language

In the essay *Survival and Identity*, philosopher David Lewis proposes an approach to the concept of survival as a mental state and holds that the two fundamental vectors defining it are *mental continuity* and *connectedness*. In other words, an individual survives when he has the capacity and the proper tools to hand down his experience, which is nothing but a link in the chain of perpetual restorations of the cultural environment he inhabits: "My present experiences, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and traits of character should have appropriate future successors. My total present mental state should be but one momentary stage in a continuing succession of mental states."[1] The succession of mental states Lewis refers to actually underlies the perpetual process of cultural restoration by successive individual reassessments of inherited cultural patterns, which we commonly recognize as tradition. Given these coordinates of cultural survival, it becomes obvious that this process is inevitably dependent on memory as its motor and medium. Finally, the awareness that language marks our destiny as narrative beings and, therefore, everything from our dreams to our memory is narratively sustained, brings us to the last term of the equation, and clarifies its relation to the other two.

The three logical steps taken so far reveal the determining role that language holds as perhaps our most intimate instrument of perception. No matter what their approach to the relationship between language and reality, scholars have agreed that what used to be considered a mere set of semantic and syntactic rules actually goes as deep as to our very perception of reality.

However, in order to keep safe distance from extreme philosophies of language, the present study adheres to a more balanced and flexible view of the concept as a culturally inherited category, which we appropriate creatively (in the sense promoted by Jacques Derrida). Therefore, language is not a rigid, coercive system that 'programs' our relationship with the world, the others, and, ultimately, ourselves. It is rather an

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inheritance that lives through us and, in the most intimately reciprocal way, ensures our survival.

This subtle archetypal equation was put into more obvious terms by philosopher Donald Davidson, who rejects both the idea of language as a system that 'contains' us like a glass ball, shaping our perception of reality, and the theories according to which language is a medium through which we see, intermediating our relationship with the world. In this sense, Davidson holds that "Language does not mirror or represent reality, any more than our senses present us with no more than appearances. […] We do not see the world through language any more than we see the world through our eyes. We don't look through our eyes, but with them. We do cope through having language."[2]

Therefore, language is *an instrument* of perception we *possess*, and which endows us with the unique ability to articulate otherwise random experiences into coherent, meaningful narrative structures that we identify as individual and collective memories, or, under more elaborated forms, history or mythology. All these are nothing but systems of coherence that foster the coordinates of our identity and survival as cultural beings in our threefold relationship with our world, the others and ourselves.

The last and, at the same time, the most subtle level of this relationship, since it is constantly conditioned and, in its turn, conditions the other two, will be explored further in this study. Hopefully, the excursion into the journal of a self – exiled writer, where the temptation of historical restoration is constantly undermined by the irrepressible need for self – retrieval will outline at least a viable perspective upon, if not a solution to the dilemma formulated by David Lewis: "When it's all over, will I myself – the very same person now thinking these thoughts and writing these words – still exist? Will any one of those who do exist afterward be me? In other words, what matters in survival is identity—identity between the I who exists now and the surviving I, who will, I hope, still exist then."[3]

2. *Un fel de jurnal* – a Journal of Self - Search

Published in 2005, Matei Călinescu's journal is, as its author reveals in its preface, the result of selective transcription of pages from an intermittent diary kept between 1973, the year when he arrived in America, determined never to return to his home country, and 1981. The title under which the writer chooses to publish these pages is the more intriguing as the brief introductory part of the journal clarifies it only partly, through direct confessions. The rest is left to us to discover by apparently accepting the ground rules of chronological narration specific to the journal as a depositary of memories, just to sneak behind them, in complicity with the author himself, and see what the text really is, or rather what it is *not*.

What we find out from the author's observations is that this journal has been transcribed selectively, therefore *polished* with the declared intention to 'expurgate' it from irrelevant details that were either too personal, or potential indiscretions towards other people. This processing is actually the first step away from the supposed spontaneity and heterogeneity of authentic memory records.

Then, behind the traditional chronological journal structure, the reader gets constant glimpses of subtler betrayal, which touches upon the very content of the genuine journal. For this text is definitely not a diary, though it notes events in the author's personal life on a daily basis, neither is it a meta - text, though it puts forward a number of self – referential considerations on the motives, psychological implications, and idiosyncrasies pertaining to journal writing. It is rather, as the author admits, just *a kind* of journal, that assumes the appearance of a space of recollection just to conceal, transparently enough, a space of self – restoration. This space belongs to the intellectual

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who struggles to reconsider himself, both as a writer, and as an individual, in a world where he has chosen, through an ironic exercise of freedom, to live as a stranger for the rest of his life.

Thus, the journal written in Romanian becomes a space of authentic freedom, where the equation survival – identity – language turns from metaphor into substance through a number of mental mechanisms that are invariably underlain by language. First of all, we notice that the sense of alienation induced by self – exile is sustained and enhanced from two major directions.

The first epitomizes an uprooting that surpasses the geographical to settle into an individual, more intimate space of disorientation and despair, lying in the shadow of symbolic suicide. His father's unexpected death, three months after the author left the country knowing he would never return, will mark his entire life with an "overwhelming sense of unfulfilled duty"[4]. The recurrence of this idea, as well as the narrative tone pertaining to it, clearly denote that the sense of helplessness induced by the impossibility of going home for the funeral is enhanced by the torment of not being able to share his grief with anyone but his wife and daughter. Actually, this is the moment that triggers the awareness that there is nobody to talk to, whereas the mourning black tie passes unnoticed among the people for whom time has an entirely different value and rhythm. Consequently, it becomes obvious why, as the writer confesses, he dates his exile from that particular moment, although the official papers are to be issued later.

The second direction is a complement to the first, further reinforcing the sense of drifting into a void space, with no chance of restoring stability and coherence. The anguish of the expatriate, whose experience of eccentricity, in the etymological sense of the word, overflows into nostalgic dreams of home, personal, almost hallucinatory projections over reality (he tends to associate faces in the street with Romanian friends and acquaintances, or even to superimpose Romanian sights over American ones).
However, none of this compares to the unsettling feeling of not being able to communicate with his younger son, Matthew, who is born in America and refuses to speak Romanian. Not possessing the tools of affective expression, speaking an artificial, 'rootless' language that lacks the spontaneity and familiarity of his mother tongue, he finds himself linguistically isolated from his own child, which stirs a feeling of helplessness and painful culpability that resonates in a false tone of voice whenever he addresses the child.

As it has already become obvious, this double alienation is language – related, tearing the individual between his uprooting from his native culture, and the tormenting awareness of impossible re – rooting into the American space, where social and political freedom already seem too dearly, almost tragically paid with the loss of his identity. At this point, the equation identity – language is expressed under a more concrete form, namely identity – country: "Losing not only my country, but also my name, I have gained a sort of indifference to myself that may be a form of wisdom. This seems to be useless, though, in my deep grief of breaking off from my country, and, actually, from myself."[5]

The relationship survival – identity – language is to be gradually outlined from the writer's meta – textual references to journal writing, not *in general*, as we may expect, but to the writing of *his* journal in Romanian. From the very tense and intense discourse of these pages, we infer that the journal is the only ground where the irreducible tensions induced by the writer's exile from his native country and language can be absorbed and turned into constructive narrative energies that exceed a merely therapeutic or recollection role and become a genuine means of survival. The apparent

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paradox put forward by Călinescu contains the essence of his journal: "Keeping a journal makes sense only for the one who pursuits estrangement from himself by all means." [6] This paradox is only apparent because, as the author himself admits on second thought, the impulse to fictionalize one's existence seems to come from the need to invest it with significance.

However, the statement is the more valid in Călinescu's case as, in writing his journal, he really pursuits temporary estrangements from himself – the social being, an American resident with legally confirmed citizenship, in favor of equally temporary, but so meaningful restorations of himself – the individual condemned to an endless exile. Once again, the linguistic support of this dichotomy between the two identities of the author is obvious: whereas English remains the language of academic writing and teaching, Romanian is the language in which he remembers or shares memories of his country with Mircea Eliade, and the only language in which he could possibly write his journal. This is why, when wondering, or rather pretending to wonder, as we may suspect, whether it wouldn't have been better to write the journal in English, the answer comes promptly and naturally: "But no, this would change too much in the dialogue with myself, […] it would force me to 'construct' myself differently…"[7]

Finally, what we should notice is Călinescu's ability to rescue the pages of his journal from the platitude of emotional and nostalgic effusions by placing them under the sign of the reversed Proustian metaphor of time. Thus, the pages written in Romanian play the essential role of 'wasting' physical time, that is of separating temporarily from the contingent and transitory reality of the adoptive country, in order to immerse into the meaningful, inner space and time of his roots. In this sense, the journal becomes the territory within which the author can restore his identity, not by 'unifying' it as Cioran had attempted by giving up his mother tongue forever, but by keeping alive a Sisyphean awareness of the absurdity, yet of the inevitability of such an attempt. As he equates his self – exile with a search for personal free time, the writer has the revelation of its uselessness and, as in a supreme irony of fate, he finds himself pursuing "instead of a Proustian search of lost time, an irreparable waste of found time."[8] These elements offer an even clearer perspective on the journal al a space of refuge and survival for the individual and the writer, who uses his 'lost language' as an instrument of wasting social time in order to restore and reaffirm his identity, for "the ideal means of wasting time is a lost language". [9]

Notes

[1] Lewis, D., *Survival and Identity*, in *Philosophical Papers. Volume I* ,Princeton University, 1983, p.55

[2] Davidson, D., *Truth, Language, and History* in *Philosophical Essays. Volume 5* University of California, Berkeley, 2005

[3] Lewis, D., *Survival and Identity*, in *Philosophical Papers. Volume I* ,Princeton University, 1983, p.55

[4] Călinescu, M., *Un fel de jurnal,* Polirom, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 9 (my translation)

[5] Călinescu, M., *Un fel de jurnal,* Polirom, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 31 (my translation)

[6] Călinescu, M., *Un fel de jurnal,* Polirom, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 49 (my translation)

[7] Călinescu, M., *Un fel de jurnal,* Polirom, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 235 (my translation)

[8] Călinescu, M., *Un fel de jurnal,* Polirom, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 185 (my translation)

[9] Călinescu, M., *Un fel de jurnal,* Polirom, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 235 (my translation)

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2. *** *Philosophical Essays. Volume 5,* University of California, Berkeley, 2005
3. *** Philosophical Papers. Volume I ,Princeton University, 1983

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